

# OFF-ROAD WAR

By Carol Parks

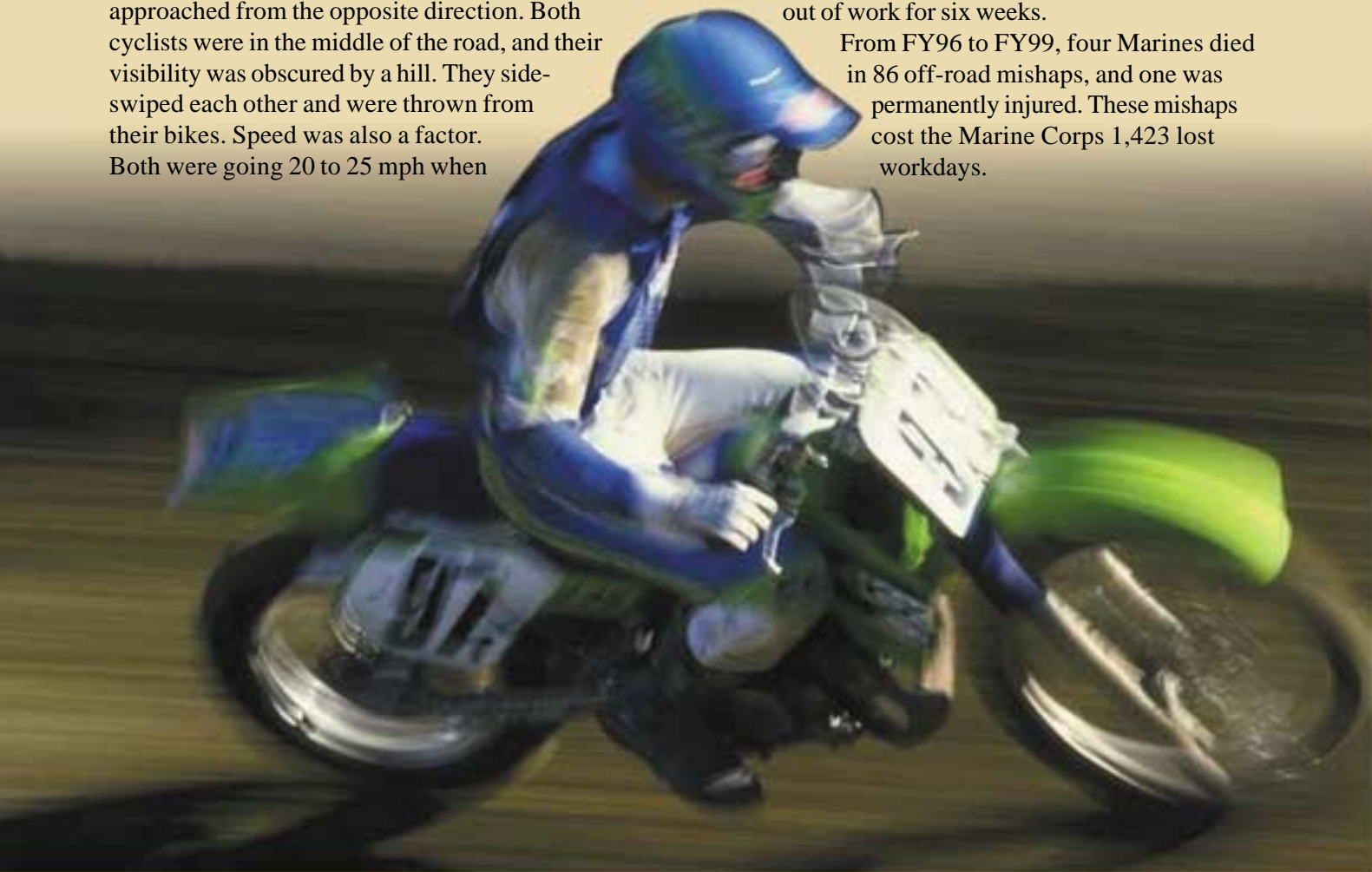
**G**oing to the field on Saturday is not something Marines look forward to. However, going to the field for a day of off-roading is a different story. More and more Marines find something exciting about conquering a tough piece of land with an even tougher machine. Off-roading has become so popular that most Marine bases allow off-roading right on the base. But with all this fun comes the potential for injury and death.

The latest off-road fatality was a 20-year-old corporal who was riding a dirt bike with his friends. He was going around a curve, when another rider approached from the opposite direction. Both cyclists were in the middle of the road, and their visibility was obscured by a hill. They side-swiped each other and were thrown from their bikes. Speed was also a factor. Both were going 20 to 25 mph when

they collided. The corporal died two days later from his injuries. In this case, alcohol was not a factor, and they wore their personal protective equipment. They were both trained in off-road motorcycling and there were no mechanical problems.

A recent injury involved a corporal riding as a passenger on an ATV in the desert. He was wearing most of the recommended gear: a helmet, boots, goggles, and long-sleeve clothing. As he crested a hill with his ATV, he plunged off a 30-foot cliff. He survived, even though he badly injured his back. He was out of work for six weeks.

From FY96 to FY99, four Marines died in 86 off-road mishaps, and one was permanently injured. These mishaps cost the Marine Corps 1,423 lost workdays.





Marines ride all sorts of off-road vehicles: dirt bikes, ATVs, jeeps, trucks, and snowmobiles. The majority of mishaps involve dirt bikes; however, there are a significant number of ATV mishaps as well.

Another severe mishap permanently disabled a lance corporal. He was riding a dirt bike for the first time on a dirt road and swerved to avoid an oncoming vehicle. He lost control and crashed into a tree. He was hospitalized for 29 days with a broken shoulder, arm, ribs and multiple punctures of the lungs. Doctors removed part of his lung and had to graft skin on both knees. He wore a helmet, gloves, long pants, eye protection, boots, and a reflective vest, but had not attended an off-road training course. On top of that he drank three beers before riding. On his first and perhaps his last day of riding, he learned the hard way that personal protective equipment doesn't protect you from lousy judgment.

Here are some suggestions for when you decide to go off-roading:

**1** Plan ahead. Before you begin a day of off-road riding, take time to plan your fun. Treat off-roading like a mission and use BAMCIS and METT-TS&L along with operational risk management<sup>1</sup> (ORM) to keep you alive and in one piece.

**2** Know the terrain. Recon the course at a low speed, and note the terrain features: inclines and declines, trail surfaces, tree limbs, rocks, erosion, and blind curves. Take into account the recent weather and its effect on the land. Knowing what to expect allows you to decide what control measures (e.g., slowing down, stopping, taking an alternate route) you can put in place so you can lower the risks of getting hurt or killed. Knowing the route can aid in an emergency situation as well.

**3** Check your equipment. Ensure your equipment works so it responds exactly the way you expect when you need it most. Don't assume anything. Inspect

your vehicle before starting. Set up points along the route where you will get out and check your vehicle, especially before negotiating a dangerous obstacle. Finally, look over your vehicle when you are done, so it will be ready for the next day of fun.

**4** Look out for yourself. Use the buddy system, and have a cell phone or radio with you. Wear protective gear, including your seat belt. Never drink alcohol before or while you're driving. Ride within your capabilities. Don't carry passengers if the operator's manual recommends against it. Speeding is often the factor that makes a dangerous situation develop into a mishap.

It's a fact that Marines train hard and play hard but the key is to remain injury free so you can finish the trail and ride another day. Have a plan and make operational risk management part of it.

## **During FY96 to FY99, four Marines died in 86 off-road mishaps, and one was disabled.**

If you plan to operate off-road vehicles on base, you are required to complete a riders course<sup>2</sup>. Training is recommended for off-base riding as well. The mishaps discussed in this brief occurred off-base. For training, contact your base safety office or the Specialty Vehicle Institute of America (SVIA) at (800) 887-2887. 🍀

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<sup>1</sup> MCO 3500.27 Operational Risk Management

<sup>2</sup> MCO 5100.19D Marine Corps Traffic Safety Program (Drive Safe)